

The Curse of Minerva

Composed two centuries ago, Lord Byron's poem condemning the removal of the Parthenon Marbles initiated a dispute that has rumbled on into the present.

James Beresford

It is 200 years since Thomas Bruce, 7th Earl of Elgin, arranged to have many of the statues, friezes and metopes removed from the Parthenon and shipped from Greece. Ever since their arrival in Britain, these 'Elgin Marbles' have generated huge controversy and there have been innumerable calls for their repatriation to Greece. This debate is not new: from the moment the Marbles first arrived in Britain there was opposition to Elgin's actions. One of the most strident of these early critics was the great Romantic poet, Lord George Gordon Byron (1788–1824). Byron's opposition to the removal of the Marbles from the Parthenon is voiced in the poem *The Curse of Minerva*, dated to 17 March 1811, in which the poet describes the once powerful patron goddess of Athens appearing before him in a weakened and enfeebled state. Athena condemns the Scottish aristocrat, and all the people of Britain, for despoiling her ancient temple, which had survived the depredations of two millennia:

*Lo! Here, despite of war and wasting fire,
I saw successive tyrannies expire.
'Scaped from the ravage of the Turk and Goth,
Thy country sends a spoiler worse than both.*

Byron had witnessed the effects of Elgin's actions during his travels in Greece while on the Grand Tour. On arriving in Athens in January 1810, Byron was shown around the Acropolis by Giovanni Lusieri, the Neapolitan agent in the employ of Lord Elgin. On the Parthenon the young poet saw the blank spaces from which the friezes and metopes had been removed. At Piraeus, he also saw the final 50 crates of Elgin's Marbles being readied for shipment to Britain. In a note to his most famous poem, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage* (1812–18), Byron commented: 'When they carry away three or four shiploads of the most valuable and massy relics that time and barbarism have left to the most injured and most celebrated of critics; when they destroy, in a vain attempt to tear down, those works which have been the admiration of ages, I know no motive which can excuse, no name which can designate, the perpetration of this dastardly devastation.'

Even before leaving for his travels on the Continent, Byron had given voice to his distaste for Elgin's collection of Greek sculpture. In *English Bards and Scotch Reviewers* (1809), the poet commented on Elgin's public display of some of the first Marbles he had removed from the Parthenon and exhibited at his house in Park Lane, London, in 1807:



Pentelic marble relief of the Procession of Horsemen, Stone 44, North Frieze of the Parthenon. H. 102cm. The British Museum.

*Let Aberdeen and Elgin still pursue
The shade of fame through regions of Virtue;
Waste useless thousands on their Phidian freaks,
Mis-shapen monuments, and maimed antiques;
And make their grand saloons a general mart
For all the mutilated blocks of art.*

Byron voiced similar disgust at Elgin's growing collection of Parthenon Marbles in *The Curse of Minerva*, writing of the 'brawny brutes' and 'languid maids, with longing sigh' who came to view the display of artworks removed from the most celebrated monument of Greece's Classical past.

*And last of all, amidst the gaping crew,
Some calm spectator, as he takes his view,
In silent indignation mix'd with grief,
Admires the plunder, but abhors the thief.*

Byron was not alone in considering Elgin's actions reprehensible. Others in early 19th century British society felt Elgin had abused his position as Ambassador to the Ottoman Empire and gone too far in removing so many of the Marbles from the Parthenon. Byron, of course, also felt considerable sympathy towards the nascent Greek struggle for independence from Turkish rule. Many members of British society shared these Hellenophile inclinations, leading Roger Atwood to note that 'Elgin's plunder had degraded, in their view, the most potent



symbol of that struggle, the Parthenon' (*Stealing History*, 2004, p. 136). In *The Curse of Minerva*, Byron furthermore has the goddess warning that, as a result of Elgin's actions, the British Empire would suffer not only her divine anger, but also international condemnation:

*'Mortal' – 'twas thus she spake – 'that blush of
shame
Proclaims thee Briton, once a noble name;
First of the mighty, foremost of the free,
Now honour'd less by all, and least by me'*

These predictions that Britain would suffer loss of prestige as a result of Elgin's actions were quickly taken to heart by politicians. In June 1816, only five years after the composition of *The Curse of Minerva*, British MP Hugh Hammersley proposed the Marbles be held in trust in Britain, to be returned to Athens as soon as Greece was liberated from Ottoman rule. Nevertheless, that same year the Marbles were purchased from Lord Elgin by the British Museum with a grant voted by Parliament.

Following Greek independence in 1832, there have been intermittent claims for the repatriation of the Marbles, although the Greek government only made its first official request in 1983, when the actress turned Minister of Culture, Melina Mercouri, spearheaded a campaign to reclaim the artworks. In Britain, the Department of National Heritage concluded in 1996 that the British Museum had no legal claim to answer. Three years later the Culture, Media and Sport Committee also found no reason for moving the Marbles from their Bloomsbury home.

Despite Byron's condemnation of Elgin's actions at the Parthenon, the poet's own respect for ancient monuments was, at times, questionable. Unlike many aristocrats of the early 19th century, he never shipped crates of antiquities back to Britain, writing in 1821: 'I opposed, and will ever oppose, the robbery of ruins from Athens, to instruct the English in Sculpture (who are as capable of sculpture as the Egyptians are of skating)'. Byron nonetheless felt the need to inscribe his name into one of the columns of the Temple of Poseidon at Cape Sounion.

A decade after composing *The Curse of Minerva*, Byron returned to Greece to join the fight for Greek liberation. It was in the Greek city of Messolonghi, while preparing an assault on the Turkish fortress at Lepanto, that that the 36-year-old poet fell sick and, following ill-advised blood-letting, developed the fever that, on 19 April 1824, claimed his life. Together with his death in the cause of Greek independence, Byron's condemnation of Elgin's removal of the Parthenon Marbles, most forcefully set out in *The Curse of Minerva*, ensured the aristocratic poet would forever after be acclaimed a champion of the people and culture of Greece. n

Lord Byron in Albanian Dress, by Thomas Phillips, 1835. Oil on canvas. H. 76.5cm, W. 63.9cm. National Portrait Gallery.